

The Effect of Hand Massage:
A Case Example
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Hands reflect the landscape of a person's life. When you touch someone's hands with compassion and sensitivity, you acknowledge their whole life experience. In our society, we touch hands as an accepted means of interaction to greet one another, offer support and to show affection. Since touching the hands is so familiar, hand massage may be gladly accepted by people living with dementia, including Alzheimer's disease.

Suzuki (2010) explored the effects of hand massage on physical and mental function and behavioral and psychological symptoms among elderly patients with dementia. The group received a consistent hand massage protocol a total of 30 times each about 20 minutes between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. Both aggressive behaviors and stress levels decreased significantly after 6 weeks. The story of Mrs. A is paraphrased from the Suzuki Study:

Mrs. A was an 84-year-old woman with AD. She had delusions that people are stealing things and was easily angered. She needed partial care for activities of daily living and used a wheelchair. Short-term memory impairment was evident, but she was relatively competent in communicating. She enjoyed hand massage and would come over in her wheelchair to ask, "Are you doing massage today?" From about the fourth week of intervention, she said, "the circulation in my hands is better, and it's nice having warm hands. I always used to wake up in the night, but these days I've been sleeping right through till the morning, and it's because of this massage."

After 6 weeks of hand massages, Mrs. A. showed slight improvement in motor function and she was much calmer and better at communicating. Paranoid delusion symptoms disappeared and she showed a decrease in wandering and aimless activity compared with before the intervention. She went from being easy to anger to smiling more frequently after the massage. She started being able to sleep through the night after receiving the massage and nurses noted a decrease in anxiety.

My own clinical experience has shown that even a simple 5 or 10 minute hand massage can go a long way in helping people with dementia feel calmer and more connected with others and their immediate environment.

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Resource:

Suzuki, M et al (2010) Physical and Psychological Effects of 6-Week Tactile Massage on Elderly Patients with Severe Dementia. *American Journal of Alzheimer's disease and Other Dementias*, December, Vol. 25 no. 8, 680-686